DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 792 UD 025 211

AUTHOR Hornick, Karen
TITLE Teaching Writing to Linguistically Diverse Students. ERIC Digest, Number 32.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Oct 86
CONTRACT 400-86-0015
NOTE 5p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Box 40 Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027 (single copy free with stamped self-addressed envelope).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cultural Differences; Elementary Secondary Education; Language Role; Learning Problems; *Nonstandard Dialects; *Teaching Methods; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

The teaching of writing to students who speak nonstandard English can be difficult because students' linguistic differences rarely indicate true incompetence, and students' writing problems may result from conflicts between the cultures and langauge uses at home and school. Factors found to encourage writing improvement are the following: (1) positive teacher attitudes; (2) regular writing practice; (3) the opportunity to write for personally significant purposes; (4) student experience in writing for many audiences; (5) rich and continuous reading experience; (6) exposure to models of writing in process and writers at work; (7) instruction in the processes of writing; (8) collaborative classroom activities; (9) one-to-one writing conferences with the teacher; (10) direct instruction in specific strategies for writing; (11) reduced formal instruction in grammar and mechanics; (12) moderate marking of the surface structure errors in student papers; (13) flexible and cumulative evaluation of student writing; and (14) writing practiced and used as a tool of learning across the curriculum. (AA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

ISSN 0889-8049

FD275792

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

TEACHING WRITING TO LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

The general failure of American high schools to teach writing poses a particularly grave problem for students who speak nonstandard English. These students are frequently penalized simply for using language as they do at home. Moreover, they are often schooled where writing instruction is weakest, and where most of their peers are also from linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Research on Linguistic and Cultural Difference and the Teaching of Writing

"Dialect" is an idealized, abstract concept. Linguists use labels such as "Standard Oral English" and "Vernacular Black English" solely to identify speakers in either social or geographical space. Thus defined, even so-called "standard" dialects are highly subject to individual variation: no individual speaks any one dialect all of the time. Written dialects can be more easily identified and codified than oral dialects, but they are also highly variable.

At a young age, most children learn easily the rules of the oral dialect of their native community and home. By school age, they can often manipulate these rules with great skill.

Thus, teachers of nonstandard English speaking students must be aware that their students' linguistic differences rarely indicate true linguistic incompetence. Teachers must also realize that their students' home language practices are fundamental to how they see themselves and the world, and that their dialects are not any less adequate linguistically than what is called standard English.

Nevertheless, students who speak nonstandard oral dialects are required to learn standard written English, which is highly varied in practice, but is deemed by schools to be largely appropriate in various contexts. Even after years of schooling, however, students' linguistic difference may be so deeply ingrained that they will have difficulty in acquiring standard English. For them, learning to write standard English can mean mastering the sophisticated surface features, semantic structures, and discourse patterns of an entirely new language system.

Moreover, because standard written English is taught by representatives of the academic subculture, teachers' cultural orientation determines school literacy. Teachers place highest value on objectivity and explicitness, especially in writing. The individualistic, competitive patterns displayed in the teacher subculture can conflict directly with the communal, cooperative verbal styles frequent in nonstandard English speaking communities.

Cultural conflict can play a role in limiting the writing achievement of nonstandard dialect speakers. Labov (1972, 1983) studied a group of Harlem adolescents who, regardless of native verbal ability, turned their backs on school because it conflicted with the street culture in which they were firmly grounded. And other research explains why, for cultural reasons, even nonstandard dialect students who are highly motivated to acquire school knowledge fail to become academically literate.

The research suggests that all language use, whether oral or written, is embedded in a social context which affects both its form and function. Children are socialized into ways of using language, and the social importance of writing varies with culture (Heath, 1983).

Most of the research on high school writing instruction points to a single greatest need: better trained teachers. If student writing is to improve, teachers colleges will need to offer more classes in writing instruction, school districts will have to provide stronger inservice support, and curriculum policies may have to be adjusted. In the meantime, however,

This article is adapted from *Language Diversity and Writing Instruction*, a monograph by Marcia Farr and Harvey Daniels. The monograph is available for $9.75 from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.

ERIC/CUE Digests draw together and summarize key information on current educational issues. Occasionally a Digest is devoted to a single report or study that is of major importance. Single copies of the **Digests** are available free from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education if the request is accompanied by a SSAE. Please write to the Clearinghouse for permission to reproduce.

UD025211

Number 32, October 1986

individual teachers can begin to make a difference. Some suggestions from research are outlined below.

How To Teach Writing Effectively

(1) *Positive Teacher Attitudes.* Research indicates that the need for supportive teachers is particularly great in writing classrooms: some findings suggest that *no* instructional method will work if the writing teacher's attitude toward students is not basically positive (Perl, 1986). When a school's official policy toward nonstandard dialects is unenlightened and punitive, a knowledgeable and caring teacher can moderate its impact.

Effective teachers of linguistically diverse students recognize that they bring considerable linguistic skill to the task of learning to write. Instructors must develop a nonjudgmental, descriptive ear for the students' dialects, and become able to recognize what their students can do with language. They must learn the difference between individual language variations and dialect-based errors. Moreover, they must make some effort to appreciate and understand the literacy practices, beliefs, and conceptual principles by which their students live.

(2) *Regular and Substantial Practice in Writing, Aimed at Developing Fluency.* Students lacking practice with written language—and accustomed to having their vernacular language criticized by outsiders—must first develop confidence in themselves as writers. Therefore, the first instructional goal in a writing program must be fluency: the relatively free, comfortable, and copious production of written discourse, without penalty for the forms of the language used.

Despite the extreme importance of simple writing practice, American students typically spend more time taking multiple choice and short answer tests than writing anything longer than a paragraph. Administrators should reconsider policies which demand that students undergo "skill-building," an approach which involves spending much time on oral drills and filling in workbook pages with no immediate meaning or application.

(3) *The Opportunity to Write for Real, Personally Significant Purposes.* Frequently, when teachers do assign essays, they regard them as reviews of previous learning rather than as opportunities for students to organize and explore new information. Students require stronger motivation for striving to master writing: specifically, they must be taught to see the usefulness of writing in getting things done in the "real" world. Nonstandard English speaking students should be encouraged to choose and develop their own topics. This can help the teacher build a trusting relationship, and can encourage students to bring their distinctive linguistic traditions into the classroom.

(4) *Student Experience in Writing for Many Audiences.* Because linguistically diverse students may face readers ignorant of or hostile to their native oral language, they have a particular need for instruction and assignments focused on the issue of audience. Practice in writing for a variety of audiences can help them adjust discourse to the anticipated needs of readers other than their teacher, and it exerts a natural pressure to edit and revise their work.

(5) *Rich and Continuous Reading Experience.* Much research has suggested that reading experience plays an important role in developing writing ability. When writing, children unconsciously experiment with the conventions of the genres they have encountered in reading (Falk, 1979). But many nonstandard English speaking students may lack exposure to expository genres. Teachers should, therefore, try to present examples of the specific genres that students are to use, so that they don't get frustrated trying to invent the conventions of a genre never before encountered. Assigned readings should include the work of other students as well as that of professional writers.

(6) *Exposure to Models of Writing in Process and Writers at Work, Including Both Teachers and Classmates.* Many nonmainstream students come from homes where writing is not a central part of their parents' occupations or of family affairs, and where the rates of parental illiteracy are high. At school, these students are asked to write without ever having seen skilled practitioners actually working at the craft. Thus, they need to learn about the process used by adult and student writers to create the final writing product.

School programs that feature teachers writing along with students have reported overall success. Using an approach developed by Graves (1983), the classroom can become a writing workshop or studio where everyone—including the teacher—is engaged in writing. Teachers or other adult models demonstrate their own composing processes by using an overhead projector or flipchart pad, and verbalizing their thinking as they choose a topic, plan an approach, generate a draft, and make revisions.

(7) *Instruction in the Processes of Writing.* The writing process model presents composing as a process or sequence of differentiated activities, not a single act.

When using the process model, the teacher's main job is to institutionalize the stages of writing—prewriting, writing, and revising—in the classroom. Special activities are devised for each stage and an appropriate amount of class time is allotted to each stage. The model works because it dispels the inexperienced writer's need to to get everything right the first time (Elbow, 1973).

The overcrowding and high absenteeism in inner city schools may make it more difficult to implement the process model. But the common alternative—that few projects are conducted in phases, over a length of time—works against solid writing instruction.

(8) *Collaborative Activities That Provide Ideas for Writing and Guidance for Revising Works in Progress.* Students who are culturally oriented toward communal and cooperative verbal styles may benefit particularly well from classroom activities which emphasize teamwork. In writing workshops and peer editing or response groups, students assist each other in various stages of the writing process.

In schools where discipline is a major problem, teachers who elect to use some form of peer collaboration may have to prepare students to work constructively and purposefully together beforehand. Studying pieces of writing by students at other schools can be helpful.

(9) *One-to-One Writing Conferences with the Teacher.* Student-teacher conferences have long been viewed as very effective means of providing writing instruction. According to one writer (Bruner, 1982), conferences supply "scaffolding," a mechanism by which a more experienced learner or thinker provides intellectual scaffolds—temporary support structures—that assist a learner in developing new ways of thinking.

The schools that dialectally diverse students are most likely to attend are the least able to offer such conferences. Urban schools often require teacher-centered, whole-class instruction. To encourage conferences, these schools must provide teachers with retraining, and, above all, the time needed to meet with students individually.

(10) *Direct Instruction in Specific Strategies and Techniques for Writing.* Although many of the learning factors described above emphasize the importance of active student involvement, research also indicates that there is a place for active instruction. But current direct instruction practices, with their emphasis on presentation and assignment-giving, require revision. In schools with a high proportion of nonstandard English speaking students, direct instruction can focus on the special issues that non-mainstream writers face. The key to successful direct instruction is to avoid stripping away student writers' sense of autonomy and responsibility.

(11) *Reduced Formal Instruction in Grammar and Mechanics.* School officials tend to believe that linguistically diverse students are in special need of formal grammar and mechanics instruction. Nonetheless, a vast number of studies have shown no positive correlation between formal grammar study and writing improvement. A number of studies have even suggested that the impact of grammar instruction is negative, though the harm probably results from the time stolen away from actual writing practice (Petrosky, 1977; Hillocks, 1986). While students and teachers can benefit from sharing a common language about the parts of a sentence and how they function, too much emphasis on grammar may inhibit writers and take too much time.

Nonstandard English speaking students need only to learn which features of their own dialects are highly stigmatized and how to replace them in their writing with the comparable standard form. Ideally, grammatical and mechanical issues are dealt with in the context of actual student writing, as part of the natural process of drafting and revising.

(12) *Moderate Marking of the Surface Structure Errors in Student Papers.* Nothing is less likely to inspire a beginning writer than receiving back a graded essay obliterated by red ink. But heavy correction, when viewed as a natural part of the teacher's duty, can threaten linguistically diverse students' personal investment in their writing. A more effective approach is to identify one or two sets of related errors—which may or may not be dialect-related—and help students focus their attention on a manageable set of problems as they draft their next piece of writing. A general oral or written comment that guides students toward needed corrections is preferable to marking every error.

(13) *Flexible and Cumulative Evaluation of Student Writing.* Dialectically different students are often punished by the myth that good writing is absolutely error-free. Teachers tend to maintain a higher standard of perfection in the mechanics of writing than in any other subject.

Given the advisibility of institutionalizing revision in the classroom, premature or overly harsh evaluation can limit a student's willingness to prepare another draft. Early reader response is helpful to writers—but only as long as it is constructive and praise predominates over criticism.

(14) *Writing Practiced and Used as a Tool of Learning Across the Curriculum.* For nonstandard English speaking students, there may be no greater academic opportunity than an integrated and consistent program of writing experience throughout their secondary education. More and more educators are beginning to believe that writing well is crucial to learning in all corners of the curriculum.

Integrating writing into all aspects of the curriculum only works with the full commitment of administrators throughout the school. Administrators should note that writing in all subjects across the curriculum fosters intraschool cooperation. Teachers in all disciplines must learn to see the value of writing as an enrichment of their own teaching. By following the progress of students writing about what they have learned, all teachers can gain invaluable insight into their students' learning.

—**Karen Hornick**

References:

Bruner, J. (1982). *On knowing: Essays for the left hand.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Elbow, P. (1973). *Writing without teachers.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Falk, J. (1979). Language acquisition in the teaching and learning of writing. *College English, 41,* 436-437.

Graves, D. (1983). *Writing: Teachers and children at work.* Exeter, NH: Heinemann.

Heath, S.B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hillocks, G. (1986). *Research in written composition.* Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English/ERIC.

Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English vernacular.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.

Labov, W. (Ed.). (1983). Recognizing Black English in the classroom. In J. Chambers (Ed.), *Black English: Educational equity and the law.* Ann Arbor, MI: Karoma.

Perl, S. (1986). *Through teachers eyes.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Petrosky, A. (1977). Research roundup: Grammar instruction: What we know. *English Journal, 66,* 86-88.

ERIC Clearinghouse
on Urban Education
Institute for Urban and Minority
Education
Box 40
Teachers College, Columbia
University
New York, NY 10027
(212) 678-3433
Erwin Flaxman, Director

SUBMIT YOUR DOCUMENTS TO ERIC...

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education regularly publishes digests and monographs about current topics. A list of publications can be obtained by writing to the Clearinghouse. We are also interested in locating materials for the ERIC data base. If you have produced research reports, conference papers, position papers, bibliographies, classroom materials, instructional guides, and other written works about

- the relationship between urban life and schooling,
- the education of blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and other minorities,
- the effects of urban experiences and environments on both children and adults,
- issues, programs, practices, and materials related to equal educational opportunity for special populations, including women and minorities,
- the relationship between schools and other urban social institutions and services, or
- innovative programs, practices, and materials that help redress the curriculum imbalance in the treatment of ethnic, national-origin and other minority groups,

send two (2) clearly typed or printed copies of each document to the Clearinghouse. Share the work you have produced with others!

Availability of Documents Cited

Publications with an ED number may be read in microfiche in any library, information center, or other institution that has an ERIC microfiche collection. They may also be purchased in either microfiche or paper copy from ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS), Computer Microfilm Corporation, 3900 Wheeler Ave., Alexandria, VA 22304.

This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education with funding from the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-86-0015. The opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of NIE or the Department of Education.

OERI
Office of Educational
Research and Improvement
U.S. Department of Education